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Preparing Public Relations and Advertising Students for the 21st Century: A Case Study

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Preparing Public Relations and Advertising Students for the 21st Century: A Case Study

Abstract

In 1993, the Task Force on Integrated Communications reported that public relations and advertising students would better be prepared to enter a changing communications industry through an "integrated" curriculum. This paper is a case study of how one university has attempted to meet that challenge.

The work has resulted in the development of an "Integrated Marketing Communications" class for advertising, public relations, and marketing seniors. Also, the public relations and advertising programs were joined to form a new integrated Public Relations/Advertising major while still allowing specialized options in the two programs.

Preparing Public Relations and Advertising Students for the 21st Century: A Case Study

Public relations and advertising graduates would be better served by an integrated curriculum that would prepare them to enter the "fast changing media and professional environments" (p. 10), concluded the Task Force on Integrated Communications. The report, "Preparing Advertising and Public Relations Students for the Communications Industry in the 21st Century" (Duncan, Caywood and Newsom, 1993), sought to assess the impact that the rapidly changing communications industry may have on the preparation of advertising and public relations majors.

The ensuing debate surrounding the proposed integration of public relations, advertising, and marketing has been well documented (see Kendall, 1994; and PR Educator, 1993 among others). Some public relations educators opposed such a move on the grounds that public relations is not a marketing function, but rather a much broader responsibility that should report directly to the CEO (Rose and Miller, 1993). Furthermore, Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) stated that both fields "represent distinct roles and are rooted in different philosophies—an issue that complicates their integration into any setting, including the classroom" (p. 17).

However, other public relations educators joined their advertising counterparts in embracing the concept (Miller and Rose, 1994). Schultz (1996) stated that the debate about IMC is a moot point because integrated communication is inevitable. The authors of a popular introductory textbook in public relations, Wilcox, Ault, Agee, and Cameron (2000), wrote that the concept of "integrating, or coordinating, communications is here to stay" (p. 19). In their study, Rose and Miller (1993) reported evidence supporting the perceived need for integrated communications by corporations and agencies, and stated "IMC is here to stay" (p. 21). Their research of small market advertising and public relations practitioners has given support to the call for an IMC program to prepare practitioners for work in both areas.

Meiser (1998), in a review of the IMC debate, concluded that public relations clearly plays a valuable role in IMC. One benefit of IMC is that public relations efforts are reinforced by other activities, which improve the opportunities for target audiences to receive and comprehend desired messages from organizations. In the IMC environment, public relations can gain prominence in all customer-based communications.

The negative implications of IMC for public relations reported by Meiser (1998) include a loss of autonomy. However, those working in public relations must familiarize themselves with priorities and challenges in other departments to become more effective within an organization. The author calls for IMC to be put

into the curriculum so students will be better prepared for the realities of the workplace.

Caywood and Ewing (1991) found in their study that public relations and advertising graduates often found employment in corporations where they worked in an integrated environment. Their conclusions were supported by the findings of the mid-western university that is the subject of this study. Analysis of data collected through annual mail surveys of graduates, as well as anecdotal evidence from the university's public relations and advertising alumni, showed that many were working in positions that called for the integration of communication skills--as well as marketing knowledge and skills--that some felt they were lacking. Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) found similar evidence in their study of educators who agreed that employers are demanding skills their programs had not covered.

Bridging the IMC gap

Armed with feedback from their graduates and with the 1993 Task Force report, members of the advertising and public relations faculty at the university which is the focus of this case study began to seek ways to better prepare their graduates for the changing job market. A committee was formed in 1995 with representatives from the advertising, public relations, and marketing programs to study possible solutions for preparing graduates for the job market of the 21st century.

The committee began its work by reviewing the findings and recommendations of the Task Force on Integrated Communications (1993). The group agreed with the report's philosophy that integrating advertising, public relations, and marketing curricula would allow students studying in these interrelated areas to have "a more conceptually unified and integrated program of communication study" (p. 5).

They also studied the Task Force's recommended curriculum, which focused on a strong liberal arts background (see Table 1). The committee concluded that the university satisfied that recommendation. Through its CORE curriculum, the university requires all students to complete a 48-hour liberal arts and sciences concentration with courses in English, speech, mathematics, philosophy, the arts, history, economics, sociology, psychology, sciences, humanities or foreign languages. In addition, the mass communications programs require an additional 17 hours in arts in sciences to meet the 65-hour requirement of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. (The university is preparing for its initial self-study in the 2001-2002 academic year.)

Table 1

**Task Force's Proposed
Integrated Communication Curriculum**

1. Strong emphasis on liberal arts.
2. Training in oral, written, and visual communication.
3. A solid understanding of business and complex organization objectives and practices.
4. An understanding of, and respect for, all of the major communication functions (advertising, direct response, event sponsorship, packaging, public relations, sales, promotion, etc.); and
5. A mastery of basic research skills to give insight into problem-solving techniques and strategies.

The advertising and public relations majors are housed in an interdisciplinary Department of Communications which offers a variety of courses that met the verbal, written, and visual communication recommendations (point 2) of the Task Force report. Students also gain an overview of the major communications functions (point 4) and are offered a course in mass communications research (point 5).

Courses were identified in the School of Business that students in advertising and public relations could take without the prerequisites required of business majors. These courses typically include courses in management and marketing (point 3). At the same time, courses in advertising and public relations were identified that marketing students could take without prerequisites.

The university committee also sought a way in which students from the three disciplines might share a common experience. From that study emerged a senior-level "Integrated Marketing Communications" course to be offered as an elective in the public relations, advertising, and marketing curricula. A study also began on the possibility of merging the pubic relations and advertising programs into an "integrated" major.

Designing the IMC course

The primary goal of the new IMC course was to create among students an understanding of how public relations, advertising, and marketing interests work together to achieve organizational objectives. The end result of the course is an integrated marketing communications campaign plan for selected local and area clients.

The professors developed a course syllabus, which has undergone several changes as the team explored new ideas and learned from their experiences. Students enrolling in the class must have had introductory courses

in marketing, and public relations or advertising, and be at least a junior. Therefore, most students come into the class after having completed most of their major discipline courses. The "Integrated Marketing Communications" course is cross-listed in the advertising, public relations, and marketing sequences.

Various teaching methods were explored, including team teaching. As only one professor could count the course in his/her teaching load for the semester, it was agreed that the three would rotate the course, counting it as a part of each professor's teaching load every third year. The other two would volunteer to make "guest lectures" in the course.

The 15-week course begins with an overview and introduction of the IMC concept and relationship marketing by the lead instructor. The topics then move into marketing concepts with an emphasis on the marketing communication process. Sessions on personal selling, advertising, promotions, special events, public relations, and direct marketing are divided among the three professors as to their areas of expertise. The two guest lecturers each spend two weeks going over their areas with the class. They also prepare and grade examinations over their topics.

Realizing the concern that some public relations educators had raised about public relations being encroached upon by marketing (see Kendall, 1994, Lauzen, 1991; *pr educator, 1993)*, the public relations faculty member on the IMC teaching team uses two approaches to the public relations presentation. First, the "holistic" concept of public relations is emphasized. Here, public relations is presented as creating a "hospitable environment" for the organization (Baskin, Aronoff, and Lattimore, 1997). The focus is on the role of public relations as a management function, telling an organization's story to its target publics to foster good will and understanding, as well as helping to shape company practices by counseling top management on public opinion and its implications.

The ability for public relations managers to be able to help top management solve business problems, participate in strategic planning, and help influence what companies are doing is emphasized. Traditional functions of public relations--counseling management, public opinion research, media relations, publicity, employee relations, community relations, public affairs, issues management, crisis communications, financial relations--are presented. These topics serve as a review for the public relations majors who are exposed to these concepts in several of the courses they take but are new for most of the advertising majors in the class.

Once the broader role of public relations is established, attention turns to the function of public relations in "marketing communications." Harris (1993) emphasized that as support for marketing, public relations helps to raise awareness, to inform and educate target audiences, to gain understanding, to build trust, and to create a climate of acceptance by consumers. A variety of cases are used to demonstrate how public relations is effectively used to support both organizational and marketing objectives.

Students are selected at random from each discipline and placed into small teams to begin preparing an IMC campaign plan book for their clients. The

students then arrange meetings with their clients to gain an understanding of the challenges that need to be addressed. The work is conducted "pro bono" for the clients as the projects are considered by the faculty to be learning experiences for the students.

The format of the IMC campaign plan includes: Situation Analysis/SWOT Analysis; Developing Strategy (including marketing goals and objectives, target markets, themes and messages, tactics, etc.); Budgeting; and the "IMC" objectives, strategy and tactics, and evaluation for the Personal Selling, Promotions, Special Events, Public Relations, Direct Marketing, and Advertising elements that are used in the campaign plan (both advertising and public relations elements are requirements). The plan book must contain a detailed campaign outline, together with appropriate examples for each communications tactic chosen to reach the organization's marketing objectives.

During the last week of class, the students make in-class presentations and present the IMC campaign plan books to their clients. Students receive peer evaluations from other team members for their individual contributions to the project. This evaluation becomes a part of their grade. The three professors individually evaluate the campaign plan books and determine an appropriate grade for the project.

Developing an "integrated" curriculum

Members of the public relations and advertising faculty also began exploring ways to bring their programs closer together to meet the interests of students who want to take courses in both areas. This was no easy task, as the department is seeking accreditation from ACEJMC. Students are, therefore, limited as to the number of courses that they can take in the mass communications area.

The Task Force (1993) stated that students might be better served by being allowed the option of studying across marketing and corporate communication disciplines as well as specializing in advertising or public relations. The study stated that the advertising and public relations specialties "will not disappear, but the distinctions between the fields may be blurred for practical, as well as professional, reasons" (p. 19).

Ross and Johnson, in their 1999 report of advertising and public relations programs, found that the number of schools unifying these programs has been steadily growing. They reported 53 joint programs, more than twice the number (23) reported in their 1993 study. At the same time, the number of advertising programs has been dropping (120 to 108) while the number of public relations programs has been increasing (119 to 145). In their latest report, Ross and Johnson (2000) reported that for the first time since 1994, numbers of students enrolled in the joint advertising/public relations has dropped (14.8%). However, the total number of students majoring in the public relations and advertising areas (39,615) continues to increase, indicating continuing interest in the fields.

Two conceptual models for developing an integrated curriculum (see Table 2) were recommended in the Task Force report (1993). The first model

offers a broad set of subject areas that are modular and are often contained in existing courses in public relations and advertising programs. The three subject areas, each with several modules, include personal development, professional development and integration. The second model is more course-specific and provides course titles for an integrated sequence. This model includes a survey/overview course, research and analysis, communication skills, and application areas.

Table 2
Two Conceptual Models of Integrated Curriculum

Model I: Integrated Modular Approach

1. Personal Development:
   Writing for communications, problem solving, visual literacy, quantitative and qualitative research skills, and presentation skills.
2. Professional Development:
   Audience insight, business understanding, strategy development, "media" understanding, law and ethics, people management, research methodology, issues and trend identification, and analysis, targeting, and segmentation.
3. Integration:
   Multi-disciplinary basic training, measurement and evaluation, and communication mix management.

Model II: Integrated Course Approach

1. Survey of Integrated Communication:
   A course similar to the introductory courses in advertising and public relations. The course would stress strategic planning for integrated communication. Students would gain exposure to a full range of advertising and public relations principles as well as the concept of integrated communication.
2. Stakeholder and Customer Behavior:
   Publics/audiences and organizational behavior, segmentation, and targeting, databases and research methodology (topics often covered in advertising, public relations, and marketing principles courses).
3. Organizational Analysis:
   Covers quantitative analysis of sales and share data, nonprofit organization's standing , ability to secure resources (time and money), research methodology including qualitative measures, logistics and budgeting, relationship between communication and operations and production areas.
4. Persuasive Communication:
   Message effectiveness, psychology and strategy of attitude and behavior change, and conflict resolution to build and maintain organizational relationships with customers and other stakeholders.
5. Message Strategy and Design:

Fundamentals of planning and executing oral, written, and visual communication.

6. Message Delivery and Evaluation:
   Combining media components of current advertising and public relations courses. Focus on stakeholder contact points, analysis of strengths and weaknesses of various ways of reaching stakeholders, cost/value comparisons of media delivery systems.
7. Campaigns:
   Hands-on assignment requiring students to plan and execute a fully integrated communication campaign, making use of all the major communication functions.
8. Internship:
   Student experience with organizations that demonstrate an understanding and practice of some level of integrated communication.

(From the Report on the Task Force on Integrated Communications, 1993, pp. 20-21).

For a model, the Task Force report (1993) used a program that had been in place since 1974 at TCU. That 124-hour program allows 33 hours in the Public Relations/Advertising sequence. Three broad areas are presented in the TCU curriculum: Journalism Courses, Sequence (Advertising and Public Relations) Courses, and Electives from a broad range of communications courses.

Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) reported that some educators are questioning whether advertising and public relations programs are falling behind professional expectations. They stated that efforts are being made to determine at what level the integrated approach should be taught--undergraduate or graduate. They reported that public relations and advertising are being "combined to represent the interrelationship between the fields and/or to more effectively utilize the talents and services of the respective faculty" (p. 9).

In their survey of educators, Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) found that a majority of advertising faculty (67%) were interested in IMC-related changes to curricula. On the other hand, a majority of public relations educators (62%) were not interested. While both groups agreed that the two disciplines are becoming more interrelated, public relations practitioners were less willing than their advertising counterparts to offer an integrated curriculum. Twice as many advertising faculty than their public relations counterparts responding to the survey reported some proposal, discussion, or actions to change their programs related to IMC.

The public relations faculty in the Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) study felt that students in an IMC sequence would not receive in-depth instruction in public relations. However, the advertising educators believed that such a program would provide in-depth instruction in advertising. These results support the literature that concludes public relations educators believe that IMC dilutes their ability to teach students what the educators think students need to know about

the field of public relations. Advertising educators, on the other hand, view IMC as an enhancement of their discipline.

In a more recent report, Pasadeos (2000) stated that public relations and advertising educators are "not as well prepared for the task (of integration) as might be thought" (p. 74). He concluded that public relations and advertising scholars do not have much in common: they don't read each others work, do not write on similar topics, do not cite a common literature, and do no agree on matters of curricular integration.

Ross and Johnson (1993) in their annual study of advertising and public relations curricula, listed 23 combined advertising and public relations programs. However, the Task Force (1993) concluded that at most of the schools, either program may be chosen as an emphasis and, therefore, the sequence was not truly integrated. Such was still the case of an informal analysis by faculty at the university that is the subject of this paper of several of the programs reported in the 1999 Ross and Johnson survey.

After reviewing relevant literature on the topic and studying several other public relations and advertising programs, the public relations and advertising faculty in this case study determined that their students could best be served by a curricular model that was more course specific (see Table 3). All students would take a common core of courses, including introductory courses in both advertising and public relations, as well as courses in mass communications law and ethics, and mass communications research.

The curriculum allows students to specialize either in public relations or advertising, or to combine elements from both areas for an "integrated" program of study. Therefore, students who wish to focus in advertising take a three-course concentration in that area, while those wishing to focus in public relations take a different three-course concentration. The remaining four courses may be taken from a list of "directed electives" in advertising, public relations, computer publishing, radio/television, and journalism to meet the specific interests of each student. The new curriculum allows students greater flexibility in preparing for their individual career interests.

For example, students interested in the "integrated" approach may select the option (Public Relations or Advertising) that most interests them, and then complete their major with electives from the other field as well as from supporting courses in other mass communications disciplines. The student who is strictly interested in advertising or public relations may select the appropriate option and complete hours from electives in the discipline of interest. These students will at least have had an introductory course in the secondary area.

Faculty advisers work closely with the public relations and advertising majors to help them to determine their interests as they enter the junior year of study. The majority of the courses in the program are offered at the junior and senior levels. The students are encouraged to join the American Advertising Federation or Public Relations Student Society of America chapters on campus to become more familiar with these areas. Each of the student groups interacts with the professional community through workshops and speakers, as well as in conference participation.

The 33-hour major, coupled with the 65 hours of arts and sciences requirement, leaves students with 26 hours (in the 124-hour curriculum) to choose a minor or to take concentrations in some other areas. Most students choose electives in business, primarily in the management and marketing areas. In the 1999-2000 academic year, the university began offering a minor in marketing, which has already proven to be popular with the advertising and public relations majors. Interpersonal/organizational communications electives also prove to be popular, primarily for those students whose focus is in public relations.

Table 3

Public Relations/Advertising Curriculum

Major Core (12 Hrs)

Introduction to Public Relations
Introduction to Advertising
Mass Communications Research
Mass Communications Law

Public Relations Option (9 Hrs)	**Advertising Option (9 hrs.)**
Basic Newswriting & Reporting	Advertising Writing & Design
Writing for Public Relations	Advertising Campaigns
Public Relations Administration	Seminar in Advertising

<u>Directed Electives:</u> (choose 12 hours from the following list of Advertising, Public Relations, Journalism, Computer Publishing, or Radio/Television courses):

Special Events & Promotions	Broadcast/Cable Sales
Independent Study (PR or ADV)	Computer Publishing I
Advanced Advertising Campaigns	Internet Communication
Integrated Marketing Comm	Feature Writing
Internship (PR or ADV)	Publications Design
*Special Topics (PR and ADV)	**Seminar in Public Relations
Network Computing	Public Relations Campaigns
Intro to Mass Comm	Seminar in Public Opinion
or Intro to Broadcasting, Cable & Internet	Media Production
	Writing for Electronic Media

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*Special Topics in Public Relations has focused on "Crisis Communication," while Special Topics in Advertising has focused on "Media Buying."
**Seminar in Public Relations has focused on "Direct Marketing."

Analyzing recent graduates

Each year the university conducts a mail survey of all its graduates to determine, among other things, the types of jobs which alumni have obtained and brief job descriptions. Around 50% of the approximately 200 advertising and public relations graduates between 1996 and 1999 responded to the requests for data.

Self-reported data from the responding advertising and public relations graduates during the four years since the IMC course was first offered show that alumni from both programs often enter similar jobs. This data closely parallels earlier studies when the university was tracking its graduates prior to implementation of the IMC course. The increasingly close ties between public relations and advertising with marketing become very obvious when the data is analyzed: more than one-fourth of advertising graduates (29%, n=10) go into positions which they describe as "marketing" while almost half (48%, n=19) of public relations graduates enter marketing positions.

Other analysis of the survey data reveals that about one-fourth of advertising (26%, n=9)) and one-fifth of public relations graduates (20%, n=8)) entered agencies or firms with job descriptions of account executives. Sixty-nine percent (n=24) of advertising graduates are working in corporate offices of various types, while almost two-thirds (n=25) of public relations graduates are employed in corporate environments. Public relations graduates were much more likely to go into not-for-profit environments (17%, n=7) than were their advertising counterparts (5%, n=2). (See Tables 4 and 5.)

Table 4

1996-99 Advertising & Public Relations Graduate Employer Survey Results

Type of Employer	Advertising (n=35)	Public Relations (n=40)
Corporate	24 (69%)	25 (63%)
Agencies/Firms	9 (26%)	8 (20%)
Not-for-profits	2 (5%)	7 (17%)

Note: Survey results do not include those who reported jobs that were not considered to be in advertising or public relations fields or entered graduate school (n=30).
Note: Only about 50% of advertising and public relations students graduating during the 1996-99 period responded to the survey.

Table 5

1996-99 Advertising & Public Relations Graduate Job Description Survey Results

Job Description	Advertising (n=35)	Public Relations (n=40)
Marketing	10 (29%)	19 (48%)
Account Executive	9 (26%)	8 (20%)
Graphic Designer	5 (14%)	0 (0%)
Promotions	5 (14%)	5 (13%)
Customer Service	1 (3%)	2 (5%)
Media Buyer	1 (3%)	2 (5%)
Copywriter	2 (6%)	0 (0%)
Communications ..	2 (6%)	1 (2%)
Recruitment	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Fundraising	0 (0%)	2 (5%)

Note: Survey results do not include those who reported jobs that were not in advertising or public relations fields or entered graduate school (n=30).
Note: Only about 50% of advertising and public relations students graduating during the 1996-99 period responded to the survey.

Conclusions

Using the Report of the Task Force on Integrated Communications (1993), other literature in the field, and information from its advertising and public relations graduates, the university which is the focus of this case study set out in the mid -1990s to find ways in which it could better prepare graduates for the changing demands of the communications industry. That study has resulted in bridging the gap among the advertising, public relations, and marketing faculty. A new senior-level course, "Integrated Marketing Communications," was designed for majors in all three areas to learn how to work together in designing an IMC campaign plan to reach organizational objectives. Another development has been the merging of the advertising and public relations curricula into a new program that allows students greater flexibility in preparing for their careers.

The university will continue to track its advertising and public relations graduates each year to determine if what is being done meets the needs of the changing marketplace. A more detailed study is being planned of the students who have taken the IMC class in the past five years to determine their opinions about the course and its usefulness to their careers. Another study will be conducted of employers to determine how graduates of this university's Public Relations/Advertising program compare to graduates of other programs.

Meanwhile, the Public Relations/Advertising major continues to grow with approximately 250 students now enrolled. Approximately 100 students are in the public relations option and another 150 are in the advertising option. These Public Relations/Advertising majors account for about one-half of the Department of Communications' enrollment. Continued growth in the program resulted in the hiring of an additional advertising faculty member in the current academic year.

As the joint Public Relations/Advertising program was implemented in the current year, it has not yet been determined just how many students will continue to choose the specialized advertising or public relations options, or how many will select the new "integrated" focus. The fact that Ross and Johnson (2000) reported the number of students enrolling in joint programs declined after several years of continued growth in that area does raise some questions for a program that is entering this phase.

However, it is expected that with the development of this new curriculum, more students in the Public Relations/Advertising major will take advantage of the opportunities offered by the program to gain a broader base of training. While the program still allows students to pursue traditional specialized public relations and advertising programs, the integrated curriculum approach should help prepare communications professionals who will be managing the integrated programs in the 21st century. Or will the concern of Griffin and Pasadeos (1998) that the merging of public relations and advertising with marketing coursework will "ultimately impair students' abilities to become fluent in any single discipline" (p.6) be applicable to the graduates of this program? Further studies will need to be conducted to determine the impact that the changes implemented by one university are making on the preparation of its public relations and advertising graduates to enter the changing advertising and public relations environments.

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